DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 301 140 HE 022 078

AUTHOR Glazer, Judith S.
TITLE The Master's Degree. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-HE-88-3
PUB DATE 88
CONTRACT RI88062014
NOTE 3p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, One Dupont Circle, Suite 630, Washington, DC 20036 (free with self-addressed stamped envelope).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Standards; *Curriculum Design; *Degree Requirements; Educational Change; Educational Innovation; Educational Quality; *Graduate Study; Higher Education; Intellectual Disciplines; *Masters Degrees; *Professional Education; Program Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

The master's degree is reviewed in terms of its current status and rate of conferral, its diversity, standards, and the dominant program models. Changes in the patterns of master's degrees conferred, by discipline, are examined, and problems associated with the proliferation of degrees are noted. Diversity in curricular models is cited as a source of concern because it makes comparison of programs, fields, and credentials difficult. It is suggested that the master's degree may be becoming the first professional degree, reflecting contemporary society's increased interest in more utilitarian and measurable objectives. Issues in assessment of program quality are addressed, including the roles of accreditation, state oversight, and institutional self-study. Major issues in program design are outlined, the principal one being the balance of theory and practice. Other issues include specialization and multidisciplinarity, admission and degree requirements, access and standards, and modes of instruction and delivery. Factors motivating and inhibiting change in the master's degree are examined. It is concluded that the master's degree must be approached as a class of degrees rather than as a generic model, and as a credential sought increasingly for its own merits rather than in relation to the bachelor's or doctoral degree. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED301140

ERIC DIGEST EDO-HE-88-3

ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education The George Washington University One Dupont Circle, Suite 630 Washington, D.C. 20036

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

The Master's Degree

Judith S. Glazer, St. John's University

NOTE: This ERIC Digest is a summary of **The Master's Degree: Tradition, Diversity, Innovation** by the same author (ERIC ED 279 260). This publication was prepared partially with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the Department.

ASHE-ERIC

This Executive Summary is a *digest only* of a new full-length report in the ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report series, prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education and published by the Association for the Study of Higher Education. Each report is a definitive review of the literature and institutional practice on a single critical issue. *Many administrators subscribe to the series and circulate reports to staff and faculty committees with responsibility in a report's topic area.* Reports are available on a subscription basis for $60 per year ($67.50 outside the U.S.). Subscriptions begin with Report 1 and conclude with Report 8 of the current series year. Single copies, at $10.00 each, are available from: Association for the Study of Higher Education, One Dupont Circle, Suite 630, Washington, D.C. 20036. Phone (202) 296-2597.

022 078

The master's degree has been shaped by the traditional arts and science model as the first postbaccalaureate degree conferred upon candidates following one year of graduate study. It is the mid-point to the doctorate, the terminal degree for most professions, and a source of enrichment in the chosen field of study. It exceeds other graduate degrees in its diversity, validating successful completion of a program in numerous disciplines and subfields of study. This report reviews the research on the development of the master's degree in the United States and its growth in the postwar technological era within the context of tradition, diversity, and change. It synthesizes research on structure and organization, curricular reform, quality control, and innovation, concluding with recommendations for future research.

What Is the Current Status of the Master's Degree?

In 1982-83, 289,921 master's degrees in 30 disciplines and 633 specialties were conferred, an increase of 75 percent in the past two decades (OERI 1985). Professional master's degrees accounted for 84.2 percent of the total, liberal arts master's degrees for 15.8 percent. Nearly three times as many master's degrees were conferred in 1982-83 as the aggregate of first professional and doctoral degrees, and more than half of them were awarded in education and business. Teacher education, once the major field partly because of its certifying role, has declined as a percentage of total degrees awarded. Business, health sciences, computer science, psychology, and public affairs are now the fastest-growing fields of study (OERI 1985). No longer can the graduate school, confronted by new professional programs seeking autonomy from the research model, function effectively as an academic "Bureau of Standards" (Pelikan 1983). State education boards, accrediting agencies, and professional associations comment with increasing frequency on the problems of the proliferation of degrees, while institutions mount efforts to attract nontraditional clienteles to existing and new degree programs. The result is uncertainty about the role of the university and the functions and purposes of graduate and professional education and about the meaning of a generic degree of such diversity that no single definition adequately describes its structure, content, and goals.

How Diversified Is the Master's Degree?

No single master's degree exists, and its diversity has been a source of concern throughout this century (Spurr 1970). The multiplicity and variety of professional programs, combined with persistent efforts to differentiate these degrees from the dominant arts and science model, have resulted in an avalanche of new titles (OERI 1985). Curricular models reflect this diversity; they vary widely in emphasis but generally include five major components—introductory core courses, a major concentration in a subfield or specialty, cognate or elective courses to expand and strengthen the program, an integrative experience, and a summative experience. Master's degrees are classified as academic, professional, or experiential, making comparisons difficult. Each discipline may have more than one designation or title, numerous fields, subfields, or concen-

trations, variable requirements for credit, different levels of degrees, and different integrative and summative experiences. Efforts to conceptualize the master's degree falter amid the continued proliferation of this level of program development by professional groups and within institutions themselves. It is only in the past decade that attention has been given to the important role of professional schools, the nature of graduate education in the professions, and the extraordinary diversification of the master's degree in certifying professional achievement in a variety of areas (CGS 1979; Spurr 1970). In an effort to bridge the gap between professional and nonprofessional disciplines, it may be that the new paradigm of graduate education is the first professional degree—a highly differentiated degree whose content and structure are based on more utilitarian and measurable objectives and directed toward more immediate outcomes that reflect contemporary societal values. The issue is not the devaluation of the baccalaureate or the master of arts, but the new dominance of professionalism at all levels, associate through doctoral degree.

How Are Standards Maintained?

The past two decades have witnessed an ongoing dialogue over how quality should be assessed. In graduate and professional education, the master's degree has received little attention, but recent research indicates that neither reputational rankings nor quantitative assessments are adequate and that multidimensional indicators are needed to assess this level of degree. The accrediting process has focused on two concerns—educational quality and institutional integrity, attempting to discourage proliferation and specialization, to define and monitor quality within specific disciplines, and to measure educational outcomes. States have reviewed academic programs as a means of coordinating, assessing, and consolidating graduate programs. State oversight is more prevalent in public than in private universities, and it is characterized by two kinds of problems: the diversity of programs, which make generic criteria difficult to sustain, and the perceived need for public institutions in particular to respond to the needs of non-traditional clienteles (Pelczar and Solmon 1984). In an effort to systematize the review of master's level programs, the Council of Graduate Schools and the Graduate Record Examination Board have devised the Graduate Program Self-Assessment Service for institutional self-study of programs or departments.

What Are the Dominant Models?

The major professional degrees range from business, engineering, and public affairs to teacher education, nursing, and library science, and they include many specialties within each degree designation. The overriding issue in the literature on these degrees is the dilemma between theory and practice—how to balance the need for practical knowledge and training in a skill with the theoretical framework of the field of study. The major issues are specialization or multidisciplinary education, requirements for admission and for the degree, access and standards, and modes of instruction and delivery. The inroads being made by corporate colleges and other noncollegiate alternatives are a source of concern within the academic community (Hugstad 1983). Business alone spends an estimated $40 to 60 billion a year on management training, much of it comparable to advanced degree programs.

Is There Room for Innovation?

In the 1960s and early 1970s, change was a function of the rapid expansion of graduate education, the vocationalism of graduate students, and the introduction of public policies to strengthen access and opportunity at all levels. Today, in a climate of retrenchment, change is linked to the management of enrollments, to the market for jobs, and to adherence to external and institutional standards. Graduate and professional schools are seeking to respond to society's and individuals' perceived needs and are encountering limited incentives with which to implement new programs and demands from state and accreditation agencies for higher standards, greater productivity, and more measurable outcomes (Folger 1984). Disincentives to change go beyond the costs and benefits of implementing new programs—to continuing preference for theoretical over applied programs, vertical specialization over breadth, and established over emergent programs in the status hierarchy (Pelczar and Solmon 1984). External degrees, experiential learning, cooperative education, interinstitutional consortia, combined degrees, interdisciplinary programs, and distance learning are some of the mechanisms and strategies being implemented in graduate and professional programs with mixed results.

A concerted effort is needed to focus on the master's degree—its academic strengths and weaknesses, its diffuse character, and its importance in the hierarchy of degrees. The master's degree is distinct from other graduate degrees and needs to be analyzed as a class of degrees rather than as one generic model. While its relationship to the baccalaureate and doctorate is important, it is increasingly sought as a credential on its own merits. By addressing the issues pervading this degree, we can modify and adapt various models that strengthen postbaccalaureate education and suggest future parameters for the master's degree.

Selected References

Order ERIC documents by "ED" number from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304. Specify paper copy (PC) or microfiche (MF) and number of pages.

Council of Graduate Schools in the United States. 1979. "The Assessment of Quality in Master's Programs." *Proceedings*. College Park, Md.: University of Maryland. ED 196 960. 195 pp. MF-$1.00; PC-$16.96.

Folger, John, ed. 1984. *Financial Incentives for Academic Quality*. New Directions for Higher Education No. 48. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hugstad, Paul S. 1983. *The Business School in the 1980s: Liberalism versus Vocationalism*. New York: Praeger.

Judge, Harry. 1982. *American Graduate Schools of Education: A View from Abroad*. New York: Ford Foundation.

Office of Educational Research and Improvement. 1985. "Bachelor's, Master's and Doctor's Degrees Conferred, by Field, 1982-83." Unpublished data. Washington, D.C.: Author. ED 179 198. 60 pp. MF-$1.00; PC-$7.29.

Pelczar, Michael J., and Solmon, Lewis C., eds. 1984. *Keeping Graduate Programs Responsive to National Needs*. New Directions for Higher Education No. 46. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pelikan, Jaroslav. 1983. *Scholarship and Its Survival: Questions on the Idea of Graduate Education*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Spurr, Stephen H. 1970. *Academic Degree Structures: Innovative Approaches. Principles of Reform in Degree Structures in the United States*. Berkeley, Cal.: Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching.